

Reply to respondents

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I would like to thank Leslie Marsh for organizing this symposium, and each of my respondents for taking the time with my book. Walker Percy once wrote that to receive reviews that both deeply engage with and appreciate what you understood yourself to be doing is such a surprising experience that “One puts it away quick, before it turns into a pumpkin” (Percy 1991, p. 411). Thinking about my book now in light of these comments—almost four years after it went to press—I know what he means.

Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer arose out of my attempts to work through some of the questions that struck me while reading Percy: How did he think human nature related to language? What did he think explained our manic attitudes toward community? And especially: where did he think America was heading?

As a political theorist, I approached the project somewhat differently than many other Percy scholars had. Rather than employing a book-by-book treatment, I concluded that a thematic approach to Percy’s many writings seemed the most promising route to addressing these points while offering an account of his distinctive social and political teaching. In surveying the many fine works that explore the influences and ideas that shaped Percy’s thinking, I also decided that with one major exception—that of his guardian, William Alexander Percy—I would steer clear of tracing out where and when he may have drawn ideas from others. I think this was justified by the fact that Percy borrowed liberally and idiosyncratically from so many different sources.

To take one example, in a letter to Kenneth Laine Ketner, Percy explained that he was not a scholar of C. S. Peirce, but rather “a thief”: “I take from him what I want and let the rest go—most of it” (Samway 1995, p. x). Percy may have sold himself short here—Jessica Hooten Wilson said it best when she suggested that the best way to think of Percy’s relationship to other authors is that their influence was a gift to his thought, and that humble imitation and reimagination ought not be thought of as flaws in a writer. We in turn ought to see the writers that influence us the same way (Hooten Wilson 2017, pp. 10-17).

While for the sake of keeping the book on point, I didn’t dwell on questions of influence, it’s hard not to see resonances between Percy and a panoply of other thinkers. Marsh relates Elizabeth Corey’s observation about Percy’s relationship to Oakeshott. I don’t know that I had ever explicitly thought that through—certainly not in the book—but her remark immediately brings to mind Will Barrett’s resolution near the end of *The Second Coming*:

Death in the form of isms and asms shall not prevail over me, orgasm, enthusiasm, liberalism, conservatism, Communism, Buddhism, Americanism, for an ism is only another way of despairing of the truth (Percy 1980, p. 273).

Especially in the shadow of 2020's ongoing political disasters, Percy's resolutely anti-ideological stance seems, sadly, more prescient than ever, making both his thought and Oakeshott's a vital guide for thinking about the threat ideology always poses to decent political life.

Elizabeth Amato draws attention to several of the most important lessons I tried to articulate in Percy's thought and amplifies upon them in a way I wish I'd done in the book. And while her comments were drafted well before the present crises, they highlight several of the ways Percy remains an essential guide to understanding what is happening to American public life.

While no one needed a prophet to be told that the long months of social distancing and lockdowns would lead to depressions both psychological and economic, what Amato highlights are the observations in Percy's stories and essays that help show why George Floyd's death touched off such a dramatic series of events.

At the moment, we live in a strange rendition of the events of *Love in the Ruins* where protests, riots, and destruction appear to be unraveling the nation. Political enthusiasms of all kinds dominate social media, elites across the nation traffic in conspiracy theories, and many of the nation's civic institutions seem paralyzed in the face of the virus and the violence. As a result, all too many of us wake each morning able to see the opening lines of the novel in a new light:

Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself... and the question came to me: has it happened at last?... Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. ...? (Percy 1971, pp. 3-4).

On the bright side, in Tom More's world as much as our own, hope remains even as the nation spirals into further disarray. We shouldn't forget that the republic remains what we might make of it through self-government.

Percy knew—and Amato reminds us—that Americans have always found themselves tempted to escape their alienation in political movements. Under normal circumstances, well-ordered families, vibrant faith lived out in church community, and wider circles of civic and business association have attenuated that threat. Months of shuttered civic and social institutions, friendships frayed by distance (or suffocated through proximity), and schooling-by-Zoom created the perfect conditions for Americans to seek a remedy for their alienation in the communities formed by protests and counter-protests.

In this vein, consider a Percyesque hypothetical:

You are a twenty-one-year-old Ivy League student whose campus has sent you home. You are bored of endless remote classes, discussion boards, and mom's deplorable politics. A protest starts tonight in town. You go, and keep turning out every day and night one is held. You meet old high school friends there, and make new ones amidst the festival atmosphere of the marches. A month or so in, you spend a week and a half getting over covid, with vivid nightmares fueled by the terror and excitement of violence. You eventually go back to the marches, but none of it changes anything. School finally resumes, but how do you just go back to class? What about your plan to join Deloitte at the end of senior year? You wonder: Is *this* all there is?

What might Percy's reaction to this lockdown student's plight look like? Percy's account of "The Depressed Self" in *Lost in the Cosmos* springs to mind: "You are depressed because you should be. You are en-

titled to your depression. In fact, you'd be deranged if you were not depressed" (Percy 1983, p. 76). The question before us is what we should do with our sadness, exacerbated as it is by the twin tragedies of covid and civic disorder.

If we reject Percy's wisdom, we might be tempted to think that 2020 would *finally* be the year that Americans' outward professions of happiness yielded to us grappling honestly with our restlessness and secret despair. But that would be too long for an escape and resolution of our alienation—and is just as utopian as seeing salvation in social justice, or some kind of contentment in American greatness restored. We need Percy's help to recognize this truth anew.

Amato highlights perhaps the most urgent reminder Percy can offer: All too many Americans have once again forgotten that politics is a consequence of our homelessness, not a tool with which we can salve our spiritual wounds. Just as in *Love in the Ruins*, political partisans tend to prefer to do the work of politics at the national level, speaking in the most abstract terms and engaging in something more like performance art than the grinding work of governing.

Americans today—both national politicians and ordinary citizens—find themselves drawn to heroic virtue rather than everyday morality. The trouble here, as Amato puts it, is that "heroic virtue is often expressed in a single, grand act, but everyday virtue should be a regular part of one's life." This encourages the idolization of political figures as much as it does the imitation of the talking heads who "destroy" one another in unserious non-debates on television and social media. But it also creates a false picture of what we ought to strive for in living well by prizing the exceptional moments over the everyday, presuming that happiness is found in the fugitive highs of greatness and unattainable anywhere else. It sets us up for a continual repetition of the boredom-elation-despair cycles that Percy depicted in his stories.

Amato captured the ways that I tried to show how Percy can help us restore our sense of life as wayfaring, and why that matters so much. We need to move away from thinking about human life in terms of the pseudo-scientific language of "problems" and "solutions." Instead, Percy reminds us where we can find rest and renewal amidst the inevitable highs and lows of a pilgrim's life.

By exploring the links between Percy's ideas and F. A. Hayek, Allen Mendenhall opens up a surprising and fruitful line of inquiry. It's surprising because I only turned to Hayek twice in the book (one a brief endnote and the other in-text, discussing his definition of scientism), leaving the reader little explicit reason to see a Hayekian influence on my thinking. But by linking them, Mendenhall captures to a surprising degree much of my view of the ways that these two thinkers intersect, and especially how we can think about matters of thought, language, and politics using their insights together.

I actually expected Mendenhall's analysis of how my take on Percy dovetails with Hayek to start with *The Sensory Order*. I spent a good part of one summer reading the book alongside Percy's essays in the philosophy of language with a friend, and this paring deeply influenced how I have come to think about the hidden order of human consciousness—and especially how much of our moral and political order depends on traditions and lifeways that shape our minds.

Both share a common explanation of alienation as well, in our inability to comprehend the predicament of the self and explain it. For Hayek, it is simply that "no explaining agent can ever explain objects of its own kind, or of its own degree of complexity, and, therefore... the human brain can never fully explain its own operations" (Hayek 1952, p. 185). As a result, we always remain strangers to ourselves, and to others. Percy looked to the singularity of language as the distinctively human capacity and repeatedly noted that despite the quantum advances of all other sciences, all of our attempts to grapple with ourselves come to failure—and we make ourselves miserable with the mishmash theories we use to try to reduce the self to some other factor:

Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment, because for one thing he acts like anything but an organism in an environment. Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the “something more” is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea. Entered as he is into a new age, he is like a child who sees everything in his new world, names everything, knows everything except himself (Percy 1975, p. 9).

Mendenhall draws several other illuminating parallels. I was particularly taken by how he traces the ways that abstraction plays a similar role in both Percy and Hayek’s thought. The mishmash at the heart of synoptic theories tends to encourage their adherents to bring a utilitarian logic to bear on circumstances and subjects that resist that kind of analysis. Whether they are Hayek’s tyrannical planners or Percy’s theory-and-consumption addled characters, those beholden to synoptic delusions suffer the greatest angst and alienation—and tend to cause it in others as well. Calculations of expediency and consequentialist reformism inevitably undermine our human dignity and the moral integrity of those who try to reason by them.

By asking what being a member of a place entails from both Hayek and Percy’s perspectives, Mendenhall points to a place that Percy remedies a missing element in Hayek’s thought. Hayek’s work defends the necessity of general laws applicable to all under which many local innovations and adaptations might flourish. Conservatives—and particularly those of the localist variety—frequently criticize his writings for their insufficient attention to community life. But I think a fair reading like that Mendenhall provides shows that Hayek’s reasoning to a great degree *depends* on the kind of robust community association and devolved power that Percy thought made for a decent polity. Percy’s account of rootedness is richer precisely because it is personal. It opens up a much stronger basis for understanding how norms and traditions “stick” with a people over time—and his stories show us how things fall apart as well. In a way, the drama of these stories completes the theoretical account that Hayek only outlines.

The trouble here is that for both authors, their preferred arrangements require making both politics and economics local affairs. As Mendenhall notes, “Percy saw radical decentralization, right down to the level of the neighbor, as an antidote to the alienating symptoms of rationalism or utilitarianism.” Classical liberals and market-friendly conservatives continually struggle to articulate how we might move back in that direction, and Percy doesn’t offer us much assistance in such a grand project. But he does give us clues for how we ought to think about the everyday work of living and working embedded in and becoming a part of a place—and such guidance might help us manage that in a way that humanizes both our political and economic lives.

Farrell O’Gorman focuses his attention on the theological dimensions of my book, and offers an important correction to my account of Percy and the Church. I struggled with how to discuss the place of Christianity in Percy’s thought, and my conclusion was, as O’Gorman notes, to highlight the ambivalence and tensions in his reasoning about the Church’s place in American life alongside the faith’s role as a place of rest in our wayfaring lives.

I think he is absolutely correct to emphasize the ways that as a committed Catholic, Percy framed his stories with the authority of the Catholic Church in mind. I emphasized Percy’s ecumenical side more than his Catholicism at times for some of the reasons O’Gorman explains. In reading and rereading the stories, I found myself observing time and again the ways in which his characters would treat their church communities as little more than one more site of theory and consumption. And so I attempted to explain how churches can both provide the necessary promise of a saving faith while also characteristically failing as all human institutions do. It struck me that for Percy, the persistence of the Christian faith in general—and the Catholic Church in particular—despite the extraordinary failures and sins that flow from every institution human beings create, is a sign of God’s providence at work.

O’Gorman’s criticism, however, is on target: if I were to revise the book, I would devote more attention to addressing the ways Percy discussed and recognized that church is more than a simple community of people who share a faith—and that the Church, though separated now by fractures in theology and authority, remains one “commissioned to make God’s grace sacramentally present in the world,” and one that will continue to “signify the presence of a transcendent but also immanent God.”

If I were writing the book today, I certainly would also take pains to explore what Percy might have had to say about the more recent and radical criticisms of American political order that have come from Catholic intellectuals. It is probably true that people have always yearned for restoration and political renewal. Percy was keenly aware of the temptations to nostalgia and especially of the political dangers that flow from that temptation. Bearing these thoughts in mind, my sense is that Percy would have viewed most integralist writings with the same “here we go again” as he imagined in *Lost in the Cosmos* when Marcus Aurelius Schuyler was approached by the man from Carolina wanting an alliance against “them,” and been repelled by the Schmittian logic of friends and enemies that supports so much of this reasoning.¹

Percy was consistent in his stories and writings that the Church commissioned to make God’s grace known in the world would remain a remnant until the second coming. This not only suggests that politically, Christendom itself offered a corrupt bargain to the Church, but that so much of the lost world traditionalists long to restore was a fantasy. And yet, I suspect Percy would assess the radical traditionalist reactions to “liberalism” and the American regime in somewhat different terms than most of that movement’s critics. He’d ask what longings lead so many intensely intellectual young Catholics to affirm that America was always doomed to liberal implosion, and to embrace the idea that only an explicitly Catholic polity will save us. Even more importantly, he’d probably suggest that the genuine love of neighbors and friends in the Church, as well as in the wider community remains the only way to attenuate those longings.

Anyone can see the fractures in our regime, but to do as many anti-liberals do and argue that our present disorders are actually fruit from a tree poisoned at the Founding, and that this disorder portends America’s doom might strike Percy as yet another species of longing for disaster—one that evades looking to the content of one’s own life and character, and defers a reckoning with the malaise of ordinary life. Movements like integralism look to heroic political action as a salve for our regime’s disorders rather than the slow, patient work of reknitting associational life in our church and community.

By turning to Percy’s implications for education, Jessica Hooten Wilson notes a challenge: “While the novelist attempts to show the way out of alienation, to reestablish human beings not as theorist-consumers but as wayfarers, the reader will digest what she desires to hear and no more.”

A great writer can sometimes capture a reader’s imagination and overcome resistance of that sort. But the challenges we face today as proponents of humanistic study are compounded by the failure of schools at every level to produce readers that can learn much about how they ought to live as a human being from books. Surely, as Wilson notes, part of the challenge is that humanities scholars have attempted to play the wrong game, as it were, justifying their teaching and writing on utilitarian grounds.

This suggests some alternative paths to restoring liberal learning today. Covid may be a disaster for conventional higher education, but it may also offer up an opportunity for those who embrace Percy’s vision to restore our fellow citizens’ self-confidence as readers and learners. Consider the example of the young student I mentioned earlier: While it is certainly possible that such a person would retreat into isolation and depression, they might also find solace—as Percy did—in some of the books that offer us clues about how we might cope with the reality of our alienated self. But as Wilson implies, that’s not all that likely to happen today without them receiving some help.

Wilson’s worries remind me of Percy’s suggestion that that learning has become a slave to our expectations about it, and the whole theoretical apparatus and set of assumptions about education that we drill into students. Learning doesn’t happen easily in the contexts that it is “supposed” to occur, and a kind of non-

contextual shock is almost required to shake people out of their dogmatic slumber.² Percy gives us good reason to believe that textbook-learning offers little more than the death of curiosity. As keepers of liberal learning and lovers of Percy's thought, the task before us is to find new and unconventional ways to expose readers of all ages to the best that has been thought and written—and the disaster before us has given us added incentive to get creative about how to do that.

Wilson reminds us that Percy had the most challenging of models in mind when he took to writing—Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. The ongoing attempts to police thought and language suggest that whatever might be said about the death of the novel or of reading, the medium retains power—a force that those threatened by the truth will inevitably seek to contain. Percy's great insight into the human condition and the beauty of his writing provide us an opportunity to introduce—he might be inclined to say, “sneak”—discomforting thoughts into the minds of Americans who desperately need to be reminded they are more than organisms in an environment or ghosts behind a social media account.

We remain wayfarers in search of home, and Percy is still one of our best guides to living well while we're here.

NOTES

- 1 This vignette appears in Percy 1983, pp. 260-1.
- 2 On this idea, see Percy (1975), “The Loss of the Creature,” esp. pp. 57-59.

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